Crossing Boundaries:

Navigating the Intersections of Gender, Violence, and Public Transit Safety

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I. Introduction and Background

Sexual violence on public transportation is a pervasive issue that affects communities worldwide, posing significant barriers to the safety and freedom of movement for many individuals, particularly women. In response to this critical problem, various governments and transit authorities have implemented gender segregation policies as a measure to mitigate the risk of victimization and provide safer travel environments for women. These policies, which allocate specific areas for women's use, aim to offer immediate protection and reassurance in public transit settings. However, while these measures may provide a temporary respite, they fall short of tackling the underlying societal norms and attitudes that perpetuate gendered violence. Through an exploration of relevant literature on the subject and a discussion of theoretical approaches, this paper will investigate the various cultural and structural factors underlying the prevalence of sexual harassment in the public realm in order to understand how broader social norms contribute to the (re)construction of the woman subject as an embodied site of violence. The public transportation networks of two cities, Tokyo and Delhi, will be employed as case studies to demonstrate the impact of this phenomenon as a cross-national and systemic issue and to examine the efficacy and implications of segregated transit. In doing so, this essay seeks to highlight the idea that while gender segregation policies on public transit do offer immediate solutions to enhance the safety of women, the neglect of deeply rooted societal norms consequently places the burden of self-policing onto women and has the potential to further legitimize gendered violence in both the private and public sphere.

Sexual violence comes in many forms and can occur in a number of different settings. For the purpose of this essay, sexual violence will be defined using the classification model devised by Shakeshaft and Cohan (1995), who differentiate the varying degrees of unwanted

non-contact and *contact* sexual abuse between two levels. According to the authors, “Level I noncontact sexual abuse is visual and includes such actions as exhibitionism, showing sexually explicit pictures, or making gestures. Level II non-contact sexual abuse is verbal and includes making sexual comments, jeering or taunting, and asking questions about sexual activity.” (Shakeshaft and Cohan 1995, 514). Furthermore, “Level I contact sexual abuse involves fondling, touching, stroking, and kissing and includes touching students on the outside of their clothes, touching them on the breasts or buttocks, and sexual hugging and kissing. Level II contact sexual abuse involves genital touching, vaginal or anal insertion, and oral/genital contact.” (ibid.).

Although sexual violence—like most forms of abuse—remains gravely underreported, data from surveys of transit users across the globe provide evidence that all categories of sexual violence are a feature of everyday life for many individuals, but especially women. For instance, the End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition commissioned a YouGov survey in 2012, asking 1,047 residents of London, England, about their experience with sexual violence in public spaces. Of the 43% of respondents who had experienced sexual harassment in a public space, 31% of women aged 18-24 and 24% of women aged 25-34 reported experiencing unwanted sexual attention on the transport system. (YouGov 2012). Similarly, another study published in 2019 surveyed 518 tertiary students in Melbourne, Australia (Whitzman et al. 2019). The authors' findings show that a staggering amount of young women respondents (79.4%) reported being sexually victimized on public transport, including an equivalent proportion of LGBTQ+ students reporting the same. Interestingly, over half (51.7%) of the male respondents also reported having been victimized (ibid).

Studies conducted in the Global South also demonstrate high rates of sexual abuse taking place on public transit. For example, among 500 users of the bus rapid transit system surveyed in Barranquilla, Colombia, 48% of women respondents reported having experienced sexual abuse, which was almost double the proportion of male respondents who reported similar experiences (26%). Furthermore, incidents of sexual violence were negatively correlated with neighbourhood socioeconomic status, suggesting that class-based factors may play a role in predicting risk of victimization (Orozco-Fontalvo et al. 2019). Furthermore, a UN report assessing the safety of the transit system in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, found that "over 90% of women and girls in the study reported experiencing some form of SV [sexual violence] when accessing public transportation" (UN Women 2014, 9).

It should be noted that sex crimes are likely to be more underreported than other crimes for a number of reasons including (but not limited to) "embarrassment and stigma associated with the crime, … perceptions by victims that they will not be believed or that the criminal justice system is ineffective, … greater fear of reprisal if they do report" (Felson & Pare 2005, 598-599), as well as revictimization by the criminal justice system "when he or she is accused of being the initial aggressor in the event" (de la Garza 2020, 34). Due to the aforementioned reasons, there tends to be a decreased likelihood for men to be willing to disclose their experiences of sexual victimization (Hlavka 2017), which should not be overlooked as a possible factor contributing to the statistical gender disparity among reported victims of sexual abuse. However, while multiple surveys do indeed provide ample evidence of men self-reporting as victims of sexual assault on public transportation and elsewhere, the lack of disclosure from male victims does not negate the gendered nature of public and private sexual violence. In one 2007 survey of individuals who reported having witnessed public sexual abuse on the New York

Subway, 93% of respondents reported that the victim of the crime was female, with 98% reporting the perpetrator as male (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris 2020, 13; Stringer 2007). Because the respondents were not asked to report on their own experiences, this third-party perspective is valuable in demonstrating the gender discrepancies between victims and perpetrators of sexual violence.

From this data, we can deduce that the phenomenon of sexual violence on public transit is a global issue affecting individuals from all walks of life; however, the primary victims of this form of violence are disproportionately young, female and/or of a lower socioeconomic status. The safety, or lack thereof, of members of these demographics in public spaces, thus raises concerns about the various cultural, legal and environmental causes surrounding this issue and the implications of the resulting consequences on broader social life. As such, measures to reduce the pervasiveness of sexual violence on public transport require a heightened consideration of the security and mobility needs of these populations that have historically been largely neglected by transit authorities (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink 2009). Only recently have certain strategies, such as public-awareness campaigns and request-stop programs (ibid., 559), been implemented by some transport networks to help mitigate this issue, with one popular intervention involving the designation of "women-only" spaces on transit vehicles. An intervention that has been increasingly adopted across a large number of cities throughout the 21st century. Included among these cities are Tokyo and Delhi, where women-only spaces have been a topic of both celebration and contention. The public transit networks in said cities will serve as subjects of analysis to help gain a deeper understanding of the efficacy and implications of gender-segregated spaces in public life.

II. Tokyo

Due to the high density of passengers and the anonymity afforded to individuals in public transit settings, monitoring and controlling behaviour within these environments poses significant challenges. The unique design of public transportation systems "may attract various types of crime, making them both generators and attractors of criminal activity" (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020, 14). The structure and nature of these settings offer an environment ripe with opportunities for criminal behaviour, where individuals may find it easier to evade detection and consequences. With the Tokyo Metro, one of the city's major transit operators, boasting an average daily ridership of 5.95 million passengers as of 2022, complaints of both contact and non-contact sexual abuse have become commonplace among Tokyo commuters for a number of years, affording the word *"chikan" (*痴漢*)* —the Japanese translation for groper/the act of groping—a staple spot in popular vocabulary (Horii & Burgess 2012). Unsurprisingly, the most common forms of sexual violence reported in a survey of over 38,000 victims of sexual assault in Tokyo involved unwanted Level I contact and Level II non-contact experiences of "being directly touched (39.6%), and being verbally harassed with sexually explicit language (40%)" (Osawa 2023, 5). In another survey of university students living in either Tokyo or Kanagawa (an adjacent district) who use public transit at least once a week, the authors found that the rate of groping among women victims was far higher on the train itself (24%) than on the platform (2%) (Shibata 2020a, 48). This widespread issue prompted the adoption of women-only train cars across a number of transit operators throughout the city.

While the first iterations of Tokyo's women-only trains reserved for female students were introduced in 1912, the trains ceased operation following the onset of the Second World War. They were subsequently reintroduced in once more 1947 before being removed again in 1973

when they were replaced with ‘priority seats’ (Horii & Burgess 2012, 42) as a result of overcrowding due to the rapid urbanization preceding the first global oil crisis (Jain & Arai 2017). It wasn’t until March of 2001 that the modern iteration of these train cars were adopted by the Keiō line, initially during the evenings in response to complaints of groping and aggressive behaviour by drunken men during the bōnenkai party season (Zielenziger 2009, 214) but it eventually became solidified as a full-time measure, with many other transit companies in the city following suit.

While the research remains limited, two notable studies suggest that there has been a relatively favourable response toward the implementation of these train cars. The data collected for the previously mentioned study by Shibata (2020a) (and expanded upon in a second article) was conducted through an online commercial survey, and involved 400 college students from ages 18-29, residing in either Tokyo or Kanagawa. The results of the survey found that while women-only cars were favoured by over a third of women respondents, the most popular measure suggested by respondents was the implementation of more CCTV cameras inside of buses/train cars (63.8%) (Shibata 2020b, 298). Another seminal work on this particular subject by Horii and Burgess (2012) found that 54% of women in their 20s or younger (but older than sixteen) would like to see a “more extensive women-only train carriage service, only 7% claimed that they were using the women-only train carriages ‘very often’” (Horii & Burgess 2012, 45), with the majority of respondents reporting that they used the carriages rarely (27%) or not at all (39%) (ibid.). While these data are not reflective of all young women using the Tokyo transportation system, their responses suggest that the primary victims of these instances of violence appreciate the women-only cars but may prefer additional or alternative measures to gender segregation.

Something also notable about the rise of *chikan* as a commonplace occurrence on Japanese transit is the rise in its prevalence as a genre of adult entertainment. Known in Japan as "Japanese Adult Videos" (JAV), a Google search of the term "ちかん JAV" (chikan porn) produces over 23 million results on the search engine alone, with the top results containing thumbnails of videos suggesting depictions of violent, coercive and non-consensual actions directed toward young women. To highlight the extent of this cultural infatuation with the behaviour, one BBC article details a year-long investigation and subsequent documentary, following BBC Eye journalists on their mission to uncover the men who produce and sell these videos (Feng et al. 2023). The journalists uncovered multiple websites dedicated entirely to selling chikan videos, where users once even had the option to purchase tailor-made videos of this nature. Along with these websites, the journalists found a "Telegram group with 4,000 members who share tips on how to sexually abuse women." (ibid.) and they even visited a chikan sex club where the interior is modelled like the inside of a metro carriage in order for patrons to legally simulate their fantasies of groping women on the train in a real-life setting (ibid.). While the relationship between the consumption of this particular media with rising rates of sexual violence on transit is correlational at best, the increase in popularity of both this specific genre of pornographic material and real-life groping may serve as reinforcing factors, creating a feedback loop, as one promotes the other and so on.

In contrast to the widespread nature of sexual assault, Tokyo's street crime and lethal crime rates are markedly low in comparison to other cities. In his comparative work on crime in New York City, for example, Michael Zimring (2011) notes that "robbery [in Tokyo] is one-fiftieth the New York rate, and even auto theft in Tokyo is less than one-tenth the tiny remaining New York rate" (Zimring 2011, 46). While Zimring also asserts that rape crimes in

Tokyo are strikingly low, only accounting for one-fifth of the New York rate (ibid.), it must be noted that the aforementioned underreporting associated with these particular crimes tends to obscure the ubiquity of the problem, rendering it invisible in the eyes of many lawmakers. Zimring's reliance on government statistics indirectly constructs a narrative that undermines the severity of the problem, whereas drawing from anecdotal evidence and community surveys rather than relying solely on governmental data paints an entirely different picture (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris 2020; Osawa 2023). As Johnson (2024) points out, in Japan's 2021 *White Paper On Crime* police claim to have solved "97 percent of rape cases and 91 percent of forcible indecency crimes" (Johnson 2024, 7) when in reality, evidence shows that only about 5-10% of assault victims report the incident to the police, with only 1-2% of these cases resulting in the offender being charged and convicted (ibid., 2). Moreover, when sex offenders in Japan are convicted, the average sentence for those convicted (25 months) is significantly shorter than the European and American averages (30 and 60, respectively) (ibid., 10) and according to the 2020 *White Paper On Crime,* more than half of convicted sex offenders received a suspended sentence, meaning that they were not incarcerated after conviction (ibid). In comparison to the conviction rates of other forms of crime, only 25.2% of convicted robbers and 48.2% of convicted thieves received a suspended sentence, meaning that individuals convicted of rape and indecency were treated much more leniently than those convicted of robbery or even theft, which does not indicate use of force (ibid.). These data suggest that nonviolent property crime is considered a more serious offence by law enforcement than the violation of the bodily integrity of another human being. The gross negligence of these crimes by authorities may be a contributing factor as to why offenders believe that they can get away with their actions, because, as it turns out, they often can.

III. Delhi

In the vast public transit networks of Delhi, India, a concerning parallel is drawn to Tokyo with respect to the epidemic of sexual violence, with a more pronounced trend of underreporting, primarily due to the stigma placed on women engaging in non-spousal intercourse (Palermo et al. 2014). The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2021 report notes that only three cases of sexual harassment on public transport were officially recorded, starkly contrasting the findings of one 2011 survey funded by the UN concerning women's safety in Delhi (Suri 2011). The findings also indicated that out of the 5,000 respondents surveyed, incidents of public sexual violence most commonly occurred in broad daylight, with the roadside being perceived as the most dangerous setting, followed by public transport vehicles and transit waiting areas (ibid, 5). Figures such as these and others prompted the city to adopt women-only train carriages in 2010 as a protective measure against violence.

The most prominent case of sexual violence on Delhi's transit system occurred in 2012 when a bus was the site of a profoundly disturbing incident of sexual violence. Widely known as the Nirbhaya case, this incident amplified the serious issue of sexual assault against women within Delhi's public transit and general public domains. On the evening of December 16, Jyoti Singh, a 23-year-old woman who would posthumously be referred to as Nirbhaya—meaning "fearless"—was subjected to a brutal gang rape and physical assault by six individuals aboard a moving bus in New Delhi. The extreme savagery of the assault led to Nirbhaya's tragic demise two weeks following the incident. Even though the vehicle in question was a privately operated charter bus, the environment in which this event took place was nonetheless within the public sphere, as they function similarly to public buses in that the driver permits entry to any individual willing to pay the fare, and they also typically traverse the same routes as those

managed by public transportation authorities. (Dasgupta 2020, 185). This case further problematizes the context of segregated transportation, highlighting the vulnerabilities that women still face in transportation settings even after Delhi's adoption of women-only transport spaces in 2010. The continued presence of gendered violence in public space begs the question as to whether the segregated dynamics of public transport inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes about men's inability to change their behaviour or control their impulses when women like Nirbhaya dare to exist in public spaces occupied by men. This view reinforces a culture of violence and male dominance that views these "animalistic drives" as an immutable part of the male psyche, granting men an excuse to place the blame for forced aggression onto the woman. This perspective not only infantilizes women, positioning them as inherently weak and incapable of defending themselves, it also perpetuates a culture of fear that restricts women's ability to navigate public spaces with men, as their presence warrants violence as acceptable and ultimately deserved.

Similar to 'chikan' in Japan, there is a cultural term in India as known as "eve-teasing", a broad term that includes Level I non-contact sexual abuse such as "making passes, obscene gestures, whistling, staring" (Dhillon & Bakaya 2014, 2) and Level I contact such as "pinching, fondling, and rubbing against women." (ibid). Similarly to the virulent presence of chikan in adult entertainment, eve-teasing was the most common form of sexual violence depicted in Hindi films between 1997-1999, according to one media analysis (Ramasubramanian & Oliver 2003). While the Hindi films in question were not necessarily pornographic in nature, the normalization of sexual violence in popular media may indirectly help legitimize the presence of this type of violence in real life, especially when these acts of harassment are shown as playful, romantic, and welcome, rather than depicting them as criminal behaviour. The very notion of eve-teasing

emphasizes the victim-blaming perspective, as the construction of women as “eves” who tempt men into sexual deviance instrumentally categorizes structural violence against women as simply “natural heterosexist male behaviour towards women who provoke men.” (Baxi 2001).

Another explanation may be drawn from the criminological concept of *social disorganization theory,* which suggests that in order for crime to occur, various conditions must be met, namely lack of social control and community participation within a specified area. Remote social relations and lack of community can lead one to depend on law and the state for protection, but “because the public sphere in India under late modernity is itself emerging in the form of a hierarchy between the sexes, law becomes defenceless to ensure the safety of women” (ibid., 197). To highlight the scope of Delhi’s lack of state intervention in the prosecution of rape, the Nirbhaya case resulted in the “only conviction obtained among the 706 rape cases filed in Delhi in 2012” (Dandona et al 2022, 9). This suggests that the persistence of rampant assault on public transport is also a reflection of institutional attitudes towards women, emphasized by the striking negligence on behalf of the legal systems in both Delhi and Tokyo concerning crimes committed against women. While the need for women-only transit inadvertently constructs an image of women as vulnerable and needing the state to paternalistically take control of their protection, the inability to rely on the state paradoxically forces women to police themselves due to a lack of state intervention, necessitating these segregated spaces where women are able to voluntarily remove themselves from the public realm. What is concerning, however, is the limited scope of this safety measure, which does not extend beyond the immediate environment of the train cars into broader public and private spheres of life.

IV. Concluding Statements

At the current moment, this superficial solution may be one of the most effective ways for women to avoid gender-based violence on public transit, especially since a large number of women riders are “transit captives” who have no other mobility options (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris 2020, 5). As such, gender segregation is an easy way to ensure women’s safety in the interim. However, the ideal solution would be the creation of an equitable public environment where women are no longer seen as the “other”. Building toward this future would be intensive, but not impossible, as it requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses the root causes of gendered violence. This approach might involve: a) the implementation of comprehensive sex education from an early age that includes discussions on gender equality and consent, b) bystander intervention training to educate the public on how to safely intervene when witnessing gendered violence, c) reforming sexual assault laws to reflect the seriousness of the crime, d) creating accessible, victim-centred reporting mechanisms to encourage survivors to come forward without fear of stigmatization, e) employing media campaigns that challenge societal attitudes towards gender and violence, and likely many others. Tackling the issue through broad social reform not only acknowledges that the issue is not only about individual perpetrators and victims but also about the societal structures and norms that drive and enable such violence. By tackling the root causes and working across multiple sectors of society, it is possible to make significant strides towards reducing and ultimately eliminating gendered violence. For now, though, it seems as though safety by segregation will have to do.

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